

**ORDER AND ACCOUNTING METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR
SERVICES PROVIDED VIA AN INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATION
NETWORK**

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates to a method and
system for providing e-commerce and accounting
services to organizations and service providers for
offerings ordered by the organization via an on-line
interactive communication network. In particular,
10 the present invention relates to a method and system
whereby a third party intermediary can absorb
certain payment, collection and billing functions on
behalf of an organization and service providers
which provide services to the organization. The term
15 service provider as used herein refers to any entity
or individual that provides a service, including the
service of providing goods.

 Although the invention is described in
connection with an embodiment for providing payment,
20 collection and billing functions on behalf of
professional service firms (the organization), their
employees and restaurants (the service provider), it
will be apparent to those skilled in the art that
this invention may be applied to a variety of
25 organizations other than professional service firms,

including an association of individuals, non-profit groups, clubs, schools, committees, government agencies, other business entities, and the like. Similarly, the present invention can be applied to service providers other than restaurants, including florists, gift shops, travel agents, transportation providers, hotels, entertainment providers, office supply providers, document services, grocery providers, beverage services, and the like.

Many employers pass through the cost of meals ordered by employees to the clients for whom those employees perform services. The process begins with the employee ordering the meal and ends with the employer billing the client, and is filled with time-consuming, costly and labor intensive administrative functions on the part of the employer, the employee and the restaurant.

For example, many companies that service clients (such as law firms, advertising agencies, accounting firms, investment banks, and the like) bill clients for meals ordered by employees. This process typically requires an employee to order food, either paying for it in cash or by credit card or charging it to a "house account." A house account allows employees to order food and the restaurant sends the employer a bill for all such food orders. The employee then provides documentation of the

meals ordered to the employer. The employer, in turn, collects and organizes the relevant records and bills each client for the food ordered by its employees. Further, the employer must reimburse the employee (if the employee paid for the meal) or pay the restaurant (if the employer has a house account).

The infrastructure involved in the accounting and payment process is paper intensive and administratively burdensome for both the employer and employee, and typically includes steps such as:

- The employer must review all of the employees' reports, verify and store documentation, and ensure that each client is properly and timely billed;
- The employer must either reimburse the employees or pay the restaurants (depending on whether the employer has house accounts with restaurants), often making these payments several months before receiving payment from the clients;
- The employees must save receipts and prepare detailed reports of meals ordered.

Figure 1 is a flow chart which details an example of how food orders are currently processed and billed. An employee working through lunch or dinner will typically order in food for delivery from a restaurant. As shown in step 1 of Figure 1, such an employee will physically search around the office for a menu. The employee will then typically contact the restaurant by telephone or facsimile and order a meal (step 2). The restaurant takes the order from the employee (step 3) and delivers the meal to the employee (step 4).

If the employer has a house account with the restaurant, the employee signs the bill and provides client information to the restaurant delivery person (step 5). The restaurant will then send the employer a bill for the meals ordered by its employees (step 6). If the employer does not have a house account, the employee will pay the restaurant directly for the food, whether by cash or by credit card (step 7). In this case, the employee will complete a reimbursement report with client account information and submit the report to the employer's accounting department (step 8).

In either case (whether house account or not) the employer's accounting department verifies the bill from the restaurant or the report from the employee (step 9). If the bill is verified, the

employer pays the restaurant (step 10) and if the report is verified the employer reimburses the employee (step 11). The employer's accounting department will then enter the meal expense information onto the client's bill (step 12) and send the bill to the client (step 13).

Additionally, at many businesses, employees will be required to maintain a record of all meals ordered to enable the accounting department to verify the house account billing statements received from the restaurants.

The invention provides numerous improvements over the prior art and corresponding benefits for the organization member/employee. For example, many business professionals and other employees working in client service industries frequently work through lunch or late into the evening. Consequently, these employees order meals from a few menus stashed in their desk drawers or from a few restaurants with whom their employer has house accounts. Many employers also rely on outside vendors to provide food for business meetings and conferences. The process of ordering can be a time-consuming, error-laden and stressful experience. In contrast, the invention can provide the employees with the following benefits:

1. Eliminate the need for the employee to submit reimbursement reports.

5 2. Easy access to a comprehensive, up-to-date list of menus, organized by food type or special preferences (e.g., kosher, vegetarian, etc.) through a user friendly and state of the art web site;

3. Memory of previous restaurant and order selections for each employee;

10 4. Records of client information, persons eating the meal and other information necessary for proper billing of that meal;

5. Servicing of orders for individuals and groups;

15 6. Providing an estimated time of arrival of the food order to the employee; and

7. Real-time assistance from a Help Desk to resolve any problems related to an order.

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employee pay the restaurant for each meal and then seek reimbursement from his or her employer.

This system will have many advantages for employers, including:

- 5 1. simplicity of paying only one bill for nearly all of the restaurant orders of its employees;
- 10 2. convenience of receiving a single electronically generated reliable and verifiable report with all of the information the employer needs to bill its clients for the meals ordered by its employees;
- 15 3. Ease the administrative burdens on an employer's employees and accounting department associated with preparing and processing reimbursement reports, and billing of clients for meals;
- 20 4. Achieve cost savings as fewer employees need to attend to the process of reimbursement for, and client billing of, meals;

5 5. Achieve time savings because employees no longer need to keep receipts or fill out forms for reimbursement, nor do accounting personnel have to spend time sorting through this information;

6. Improve accuracy in billing because there are fewer opportunities for human error;

10 7. Improve cash flow because employers will, electronically, receive client billing information frequently and regularly. This enables the employer to bill its clients more quickly and, therefore, receive payment more quickly for the money it has paid out for these
15 meals on the client's behalf;

20 8. Monitoring employee satisfaction of the restaurants the employee is ordering from and removing restaurants from the web site that do not deliver in a timely fashion or otherwise do not meet predefined standards.

The invention provides numerous benefits for the restaurant as well. Because the intermediary maintains records of all transactions between the

restaurant and the employees of a particular
employer, the invention will streamline a
restaurant's payment and collection efforts by
enabling the restaurant to dispense with taking
5 credit card orders from that employer's employees
and, instead, allow the intermediary to provide a
single bill to the employer on that restaurant's
behalf. A restaurant listed on the database will
have its full menu displayed to potential customers
10 on the web site, and the menu can be updated
electronically. Also, the intermediary can allow the
restaurant to list daily specials with the service,
as well as discount offerings. Among the benefits a
restaurant can recognize by being listed in the
15 database are:

- Increased revenue and improved marketing generated by its menu being accessible to a larger number of potential customers;
- Lower costs because, by letting the intermediary bill an employer on its behalf, this will lower the restaurant's operating overhead related to billing, collections and marketing;

- Elimination of credit card fees that a restaurant pays (typically, between 2% and 3%, plus a processing fee), because the intermediary is sending the restaurants' bills to the employers, the employers are reimbursing the intermediary and the intermediary is wiring the monies or sending a check to the restaurants.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, the service will be appealing because it can (but does not have to) be implemented as a free service to the employer and employee, with a set percentage (e.g., 6%) of the dollar total of each order being billed to the restaurant. The cost to the restaurant is at least partially offset by the fact that the restaurant will not pay a credit card transaction fee for the vast majority of orders placed using the invention. Also, there is no cost to the restaurant to participate in the service as the restaurant only pays if it is actually making money through the service.

The present invention provides these and other advantages over the current methods of ordering, billing, and paying for meals delivered to employees, as well as convenience, time savings, and

Methods and systems providing the above and other advantages are provided.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates to a method and system for providing e-commerce and accounting services to organizations and service providers for offerings ordered by the organization via an on-line interactive communication network. In particular, the present invention relates to a method and system whereby a third party intermediary can absorb certain payment, collection and billing functions on behalf of an organization and service providers which provide services to the organization. The term service provider as used herein refers to any entity or individual that provides a service, including the service of providing goods.

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15 In an illustrated embodiment, the present invention provides a method and system for providing payment, collection and billing functions on behalf of professional service firms (the organization), their employees and restaurants (the service provider) used by their employees through the use of a searchable database accessible via an on-line interactive communication network. The term restaurant is used in a generic sense and includes any food or beverage provider.

As will be evident from the following description, the present invention is applicable in any situation where an organization purchases a service (which can be the provision of goods) from a service provider and the organization then passes the cost of the service on to another party, such as a client.

In a particular embodiment of the invention, an intermediary provides e-commerce and accounting services to organizations and service providers for offerings ordered by members of the organization and delivered by the service provider. The intermediary provides, maintains, and monitors a computerized searchable database of service providers with associated offerings. Members of an organization are allowed to individually access the database via an interactive communication network (e.g., a global communication network such as the Internet and the like). The members are able to select a service provider from the database and to select offerings from the selected service provider. The members communicate billing information to the intermediary which billing information is stored at the intermediary. The offerings selected by the members are communicated from the intermediary to the selected service provider. The intermediary then provides a consolidated invoice to the organization

for all offerings ordered by the members during a predetermined time period.

In a further embodiment of the invention, the intermediary collects payment from the organization on the consolidated invoice. The intermediary then pays the service provider for all offerings ordered by the members during the predetermined time period.

The members may be provided with an additional option of paying for the offering via one of a credit card or cash, in which instance the offering is not billed to the organization on the consolidated invoice.

In a further embodiment of the invention, the organization is a business and the members are employees of the business. The billing information in this embodiment may include at least one of the employees' personal identification numbers, a specific identification number for said business, the business' address, the business' telephone number, and client billing codes.

In another embodiment of the invention, the searchable database is provided in the form of a searchable web site.

The web site may include at least one web page associated with each restaurant in the database, which web page displays at least one of the

order time, meal cost, client name, client code, restaurant name.

5 The receipt can be forwarded from the intermediary to at least one of the employee, the restaurant, and the organization. The receipt may be forwarded from the intermediary via one of facsimile, email, a global communication network, or said interactive communication network.

10 In a further embodiment of the invention, the intermediary can forward to the employee an estimated time of meal delivery from the restaurant to the organization.

15 The database is searchable by at least one of restaurant name, food type, food preference, and restaurant location.

20 In another embodiment of the invention, the business maintains house accounts with the restaurants and the consolidated invoice provides consolidation of amounts due on the house accounts.

25 In a further embodiment of the invention, the intermediary retains a commission from the payment received from the organization, wherein only the balance of the payment from the organization minus the commission is forwarded by the intermediary to the service provider.

 In another embodiment of the invention, the intermediary is capable of providing a history of

previous orders for each member. The intermediary can also provide real-time assistance to the organization, the employee or the service provider to resolve problems associated with an order.

5 In a further embodiment of the invention the intermediary can provide a consolidated invoice to the organization via one of facsimile, email, a global communication network, or said interactive communication network. The consolidated invoice may
10 contain only amounts due for offerings ordered from a particular service provider, such that multiple consolidated reports may be provided, each relating to a separate service provider. In the alternative, the consolidated invoice may contain amounts due to
15 each service provider which has been ordered from during the predetermined time period.

 In an alternate embodiment, the service providers may be providers of flowers, gifts, transportation, accommodations, travel arrangement,
20 entertainment, office supplies, office copies, documents, food, or beverages.

 In a further embodiment, the members are only allowed access to the searchable database for a pre-selected group of service providers. The pre-
25 selected group of service providers may be determined based on geographic location of the

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organization. The geographic location can be determined by proximity to the organization.

In another embodiment of the invention, delivery of the offerings from the service provider to the members is provided for.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a flowchart illustrating the prior art method of processing and billing food orders;

5 Figure 2 is a block diagram of a first embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 3 is a block diagram of a second embodiment of the invention;

10 Figure 4 is a flowchart illustrating the process of ordering and accounting for food orders in accordance with the invention; and

Figure 5 is a process diagram illustrating the interaction between and functions of each of the customer, system of the invention, and service provider.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates to the provision
of e-commerce and accounting services to
organizations and service providers, for offerings
ordered by the organization via an on-line
interactive communication network. In particular,
the present invention relates to a method and system
whereby a third party intermediary can absorb
certain payment, collection and billing functions on
10 behalf of an organization and service providers used
by the organization. The term "service provider" as
used herein refers to any entity or individual that
provides a service, including the service of
providing goods.

15 In an illustrated embodiment provided for
purposes of example, payment, collection and billing
functions are provided on behalf of professional
service firms (the organization) and their
employees, and restaurants (the service provider). A
20 searchable database accessible via an on-line
interactive communication network is provided to
enable employees to order meals that are
subsequently billed to the employer. The term

restaurant is used in a generic sense and includes any food or beverage provider.

Although the invention is tailored to the situation where an employee of a professional service firm (e.g., legal, advertising, accounting, consulting, investment banking, recruiting, public relations, and the like) orders meals from a restaurant, it will be apparent to those skilled in the art that this invention may be applied to a variety of organizations other than professional service firms, including an association of individuals, non-profit groups, clubs, schools, committees, government agencies, other business entities, and the like. Similarly, the present invention can be applied to service providers other than restaurants, including, florists, gift shops, travel agents, transportation providers, hotels, entertainment providers, office supply providers, grocery providers, and the like.

As will be evident from the following description, the present invention is applicable in any situation where an organization purchases a service (which can be the provision of goods) from a service provider and the organization then passes the cost of the service on to another party, such as a client.

Before referring to the Figures, a generalized example of a particular embodiment of the invention is provided to show how the invention works:

- 5 • The employee orders food on the
intermediary's easy to use web site. The
employee will provide an employee and
employer specific identification number. The
system will automatically retrieve all the
10 related data according to the specific
employee and employer identification number
entered (i.e., delivery address).
- 15 • The employee will enter the address and pick
a time for the delivery. The employee can
get food delivered now or later, and the
system will only show restaurants that
20 deliver at the time specified by the
employee and that deliver to the employee's
specified location.
- 25 • The employee will pick a type of food (e.g.,
Italian, Chinese, etc.): The system will
show the employee the restaurants from which
he or she most recently ordered, and will
also allow the employee to choose a type of
food. When a type of food is selected,
combined with the employee's selected
delivery time and specified address, the

system will only show the employee menus satisfying all of the criteria provided by the employee. The employee prints out a receipt with all of the pertinent information, including his or her order, a confirmation number, contact information of a Help Desk, and the like.

- The employee will pick a restaurant. The employee can browse menus, see daily specials and coupons offered by each restaurant, etc. When the employee picks a menu, he or she will select menu items which will be remembered by the system. The employee will be able to select from multiple menus if there is more than one person ordering. Also, menus will be able to be printed so that people can review the menu and make selections.
- The employee will enter billing information (if applicable). After selecting all of the food items, the employee will enter the necessary client billing information. For employees who are buying food which does not get billed to a client, the employees will provide their credit card information. The system will automatically remember the employee's credit card information for

5 the intermediary's service and paid by credit card, the employer can reimburse the employee using the information provided by the intermediary rather than burdening the employee with the administrative obligation of preparing and submitting a reimbursement request which also must be processed and verified by the employer's accounting department.

10 • The intermediary pays the restaurants upon receipt of payment by the employers, net of a percentage commission (therefore, avoiding the burden of collecting the commission from the restaurants). This eliminates the need of the restaurant to

15 send bills and collect for its house accounts, as well as eliminating the fees associated with accepting credit card orders.

20 • The intermediary will provide a cutting-edge, user friendly and comprehensive web site.

25 In a particular embodiment as shown in Figure 2, an intermediary 15 provides e-commerce and accounting services to organizations 20 and service providers 30 for offerings ordered by members 25 of

the organization 20 and delivered by the service provider 30. The intermediary 15 provides, maintains, and monitors a computerized searchable database 40 of service providers 30 with associated offerings. Members 25 of an organization 20 are allowed to individually access the database 40 via an interactive communication network 50 (e.g., a global communication network such as the Internet and the like). The database 40 is in communication with the interactive communication network via communications software 41 and server 42. The members 25 are able to select a service provider 30 from the database 40 and to select offerings from the selected service provider 30. The members 25 communicate billing information (e.g., a client account number, organization account number, and/or employee number) to the intermediary 15, which billing information is stored at the intermediary 15. Although the members 25 are shown in Figure 2 as being physically located at the office of the organization 20, the members may also access the database 40 from other locations (e.g., off site meeting or at home).

The offerings selected by the members 25 are communicated from the intermediary 15 to the selected service provider 30 (e.g., via the interactive communication network 50, via telephone

or facsimile over a public switched telephone network 52, or via any other communication scheme now or hereafter available). The intermediary 15 then provides a consolidated invoice to the organization 20 (e.g., via an organization administrator 22) for all offerings ordered by the members 25 during a predetermined time period, such as weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.

The interactive communication network 50 may be a global communications network such as the Internet, a localized or regional communications network, or the like.

In a further embodiment of the invention, the intermediary 15 collects payment from the organization 20 on the consolidated invoice. The intermediary 15 then pays the different service providers 30 for all offerings ordered from the respective service providers by the members 25 during the predetermined time period.

The members 25 may be provided with an additional option of paying for the offering via one of a credit card or cash, in which instance the offering is not billed to the organization on the consolidated invoice. As shown in Figure 3, when the employee 25 uses a credit card to pay for the meal, additional processing software 43 associated with the intermediary 15 is required in order to enable

processing of the credit card transaction and communication with a processing server 60 of the credit card company (or a third party on behalf of the credit card company).

5 In a further embodiment of the invention, the organization 20 is a business and the members 25 are employees of the business. The billing information in this embodiment may include at least one of the employees' personal identification numbers, a
10 specific identification number for said business, the business' address, the business' telephone number, and client billing codes.

 In another embodiment of the invention, the searchable database 40 is provided in the form of a
15 searchable web site. The web site may include at least one web page associated with each restaurant in the database, which web page displays at least one of the restaurant menu, the restaurant food type, and the restaurant specialties of the day.

20 In a further embodiment of the invention, the intermediary 15 is capable of generating a report of all meals ordered by the employees 25 during a specified time period containing at least one of order date, order time, employee name, employee's
25 personal identification number, meal ordered, meal cost, client name, client code, and restaurant name.

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50. The receipt can also be forwarded via conventional mail or courier.

Various advantageous features of the present invention are now described. For example, the intermediary 15 can forward to the employee 25 an estimated time of meal delivery from the restaurant 30 to the organization 20.

To assist an employee in choosing and obtaining food, the database 40 is searchable by at least one of restaurant name, food type, food preference, and restaurant location.

The invention is particularly suitable to situations where the business 20 maintains house accounts with the restaurants 30. In such a situation, the consolidated invoice provides consolidation of amounts due on the house accounts.

Obviously, the intermediary will want to be compensated for the services provided. In a preferred embodiment, the intermediary 15 retains a commission from the payment received from the organization 20, wherein only the balance of the payment from the organization 20 minus the commission is forwarded by the intermediary 15 to the service provider 30.

The intermediary 15 is also provided with the capability of providing a history of previous orders for each member 25. Moreover, the intermediary 15

location of the organization 20. The geographic location can be determined by proximity to the organization 20. The pre-selected group can be determined based on other factors as well, such as price points.

Once an order is placed and accepted, the service provider 30 provides for delivery 32 of the offerings to the members 25.

Figure 4 is a flowchart illustrating one possible implementation of the present invention. The member/employee accesses the database (Step 110). The employee then selects a restaurant and orders a meal billable to the client, in which case client account information is provided (Step 120). In the alternative, the employee can order a meal which is not client billable, in which case the employee provides credit card information (e.g., personal credit card or corporate credit card) (Step 130). In either case, the intermediary transmits the order to the selected restaurant (Step 140) and the restaurant may provide an estimated time of delivery to the intermediary (Step 150). The intermediary then provides the organization/employer with a single consolidated invoice for all the restaurant orders which contains sufficient information to enable the organization to bill the organization's clients for all orders not prepaid by the employees

(Step 160). The employer can then bill the clients (Step 170). The employer pays the intermediary for all the orders which were not prepaid by the employees (Step 180). The intermediary then deducts its fee and pays the restaurants (Step 190). The employer may reimburse the employees for orders prepaid by the employee (Step 200).

Figure 5 is a detailed flowchart of an example of the ordering process of present invention (Steps 110 through 140 of Figure 4). The inputs and functions of each of the customer, the system, and the restaurant are broken down in the Figure. Initially, the employee accesses the database and enters his or her identification information (Step 111). The system then automatically retrieves all the related data according to the employee identification (e.g., organization name, delivery address, list of clients to select from, order history, etc.) (Step 112). The retrieved information is displayed on the employee's screen for verification and possible editing. The employee can search the database for a restaurant according to parameters such as: name of restaurant, Chinese, kosher, vegetarian, health conscious, etc. (Step 113). The system returns a list of restaurants based on the search criteria and which restaurants deliver to the employee's address (Step 114). The employee

scrolls through the list of restaurants and selects the one from which he or she wishes to order (Step 115). The employee views the menu of the selected restaurant and selects the item he or she wishes to order (Step 121). The employee is able to print this screen for his or her records (Step 122). The system automatically sends the order, such as by fax, e-mail, or other communication to the restaurant with the order information (Step 123). The restaurant receives and processes the order and may send an e-mail, fax, or other communication to the system of the estimated time of delivery (Step 124). The restaurant delivers the meal (Step 125). The employee eats the meal (Step 126).

As discussed above, the invention may be presented as a web site accessible by the members of the organization. An example of a particular web site implementation which may be provided by the intermediary is as follows:

SCREEN ONE

- Web site logo and link to contact intermediary are provided.
- Employee enters employer's specific identification number and an employee specific identification number. [The system will

automatically know the employers' addresses. If the delivery address is different, the employee will be able to insert a different address.]

- 5 • If the employee is billing this order to a client, then the employee will enter the necessary client billing information. If the employee is paying for this order with his or her own credit card, he or she will enter all of the necessary credit card information.
- 10 • Allow employee to select a type of food (e.g., Chinese, Italian, kosher, vegetarian, healthy, etc.) or enter the specific name of a restaurant.
- 15 • Provide pull-down menu to allow employee to select from the five most recent restaurants he or she ordered from.
- 20 • The system will automatically assume that the order is to be delivered as soon as possible unless otherwise indicated.
- On the bottom of the screen there may be one or two restaurants that can advertise their specials (for an additional charge payable to the intermediary).

SCREEN TWO

- 25 • Employee will see only those restaurants that fit the parameters determined by the employee.

- Next to the name of each restaurant, there will be a description of the type of restaurant (e.g., Chinese, Italian, kosher, etc.).
- Employee will scroll through the available restaurants and select the restaurant from which he or she wishes to order.

SCREEN THREE

- Employee will view the menu of the selected restaurant and select each item he or she wishes to order. The items on the menu can be broken down into various categories, such as appetizers, salads, entrees, desserts, beverages, specials, and the like. The amount of the order will be automatically added up on the right side of the screen while the employee is ordering. The employer can supply the intermediary with a set percentage amount for a tip that the intermediary will apply to all orders by any employee, or, in the alternative the employee can type in the tip.
- The employee will be able to provide specific instructions for the order (e.g., no MSG, spicy, medium rare).

SCREEN FOUR

- This screen will give the employee a confirmation number, the employer and employee specific identification number, the client/matter number, the order, the phone number of intermediary's Help Desk to call or e-mail with any problems concerning the order and allow the employee to print out all of this information.

Then employee will be given the opportunity to go back to Screen One and place another order at another restaurant with the same or different client/matter number. The first order will be saved by the intermediary.

It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that the implementation described above is only one way in which the method and system of the present invention can be set up. All alternatives are intended to be included within the scope of the invention.

It should now be appreciated that the present invention provides an improved method and system whereby a third party intermediary can absorb certain payment, collection and billing functions on behalf of an organization and service providers which provide services to the organization.